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Debate & Discussion

Covert in Nicaragua

Congressional arguments over Central American policies currently focus on covert activities to aid counter-revolutionary forces fighting the Sandinist regime in Nicaragua. Representative Michael D. Barnes, of Maryland's Eighth District, head of the House subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, here explains why he and most of his fellow Democrats oppose covert action. Representative Robert J. Lagamarsino, of California, ranking Republican on the subcommittee, states why he and most GOP members support the administration.

LAST WEEK the House Foreign Affairs Committee approved a bill prohibiting U.S. intelligence agencies from covertly engaging in or supporting "military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua," and authorizing \$80 million over the next two years for overt assistance to friendly countries in Central America for controlling the flow of arms through their territories. I voted for the bill.

The Foreign Affairs Committee voted to prohibit covert action in Nicaragua for three fundamental reasons. First, the United States is prohibited by treaty from engaging in such action. Article 18 of the Charter of the Organization of American States flatly prohibits any American state from intervening in the affairs of another. It is illegal under international law.

Second, the covert action is il-

By Michael D. Barnes

legal under domestic law. Congress has prohibited U.S. intelligence agencies from providing support for any group for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua. Since it is the publicly stated purpose of the Nicaraguan exile groups that are aided by the CIA to overthrow that government, it takes considerable legal sophistry to argue that the law is not being violated.

Some dismiss treaty obligations and domestic law as irrelevant because "the Nicaraguans are doing it, too." If Nicaragua tries to subvert its neighbors, this argument goes, then we shouldn't be dissuaded by legal niceties from subverting Nicaragua.

I am not a proponent of getting into the gutter with our enemies. If we must subvert our own legal system to subvert Nicaragua, then the price is too high. As former Deputy Secretary of State George Ball recently wrote, "the administration seems blind to the reality that our democracy is ineffective when it acts out of character. Sooner or later, self-disgust gets in the way. Unless we change our habits, we shall find ourselves in ever-deepening trouble."

The third reason for prohibiting covert action: it doesn't work. It is simply incontrovertible that U.S. attempts to destabilize Nicaragua have failed to halt Nicaraguan support for the left in El Salvador; contributed to the destabilization of Honduras and Costa Rica; created international sympathy for Nicaragua when there ought to be condemnation; justified increased repression within Nicaragua; and in general strengthened the hand of the hardliners within the Sandinista government who seek to take their revolution in a direction contrary to our interests.

The arguments against this bill do not hold water. The attempt of opponents of the committee's action to paint it as destroying the president's ability to resist Nicaraguan subversion of Central America is absurd on its face. The bill authorizes \$80 million for precisely that purpose.

The bill does not tie the president's hands in Central America. There are numerous above-board ways in which the president and the Congress can work together to persuade the Nicaraguans to mind

their own business and to help Central America's other nations resist subversion — most notably by boosting their capacity to provide equitable government and economic development for their people.

These attempts to overthrow a recognized government are counterproductive and contrary to our beliefs and commitments. They cannot and do not command the support or the respect of Congress, the American people, or the international community. They hamper our ability to pursue our interests in Central America. As Secretary Ball has said, "If we were prudent, we would stay home, leaving the problem to the arbitrament of other Latin American nations. Their interest in peaceful solutions is even more immediate than ours."

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